

QH
1
E11X
NH

JOURNAL
THE EAST AFRICA NATURAL HISTORY
SOCIETY AND NATIONAL MUSEUM

15 October, 1977

Vol. 31

No. 162

**GREAT BLACK-HEADED GULLS *LARUS ICHYTHAETUS* AND RED-NECKED
PHALAROPES *PHALAROPUS LOBATUS* INLAND IN ETHIOPIA**

By

J. S. Ash.

Smithsonian Institution

*NAMRU-5, c/o American Embassy, P.O. Box 1014, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

and

O. M. Ashford

World Meteorological Organization, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland

An unprecedented influx of Great Black-headed Gulls *Larus ichythaetus* and Red-necked Phalaropes *Phalaropus lobatus* occurred inland at Lake Abiata ($7^{\circ} 36'N$, $38^{\circ} 40'E$) at 1585 m in the Ethiopian Rift Valley in 1972/1973. Eleven phalaropes (a party of ten and a single bird) were seen on 2 December 1972 (JSA); a group of four was present in the same place the following day (OMA) and a few individuals on 4 December (OMA). None was seen on subsequent visits.

The first of the gulls, a flock of about 20, was found on 28 December 1972 (OMA), and this number had increased to 83 on 12 January 1973 and 96 on 3 February but was reduced to 25 on 10 March (JSA). In marked contrast to most birds at Abiata, they were very shy and did not allow close approach even in a motor vehicle.

Until this observation, the only inland records of the Red-necked Phalarope in Ethiopia were of three birds at Lake Basaaka in October 1968 (Hay 1969), and single birds at Lake Zwai and at Bahadu on 16 January and 25 April 1972 (Ash 1972). Subsequently the Tylers (1974) recorded one at Koka Lake on 7 January 1974, and one at Bishoftu. Earp (1973) gave reasons for stating that he was "fairly convinced" it was an example of *P. fulicarius*.

Red-necked Phalaropes, and also a few grey, have been recorded rather more frequently since 1959 in Kenya (Backhurst *et al.*, 1973) and more recently in larger numbers at Lake Turkana (L.Rudolf) by the Hopsons (1973).

The Great Black-headed Gulls were more remarkable. There is one previous observation from inland, from Abiata, a bird on 22 January 1972, originally claimed as uncertain (Ash 1972), but confirmed retrospectively following the present observations. Otherwise, it has only been known as a rare visitor to the Red Sea coast of Eritrea (Urban & Brown 1971).

Such unusual inland occurrences of normally maritime or littoral species are frequently related to unusual weather and especially to exceptionally strong onshore winds. It was therefore, at first, tempting to relate the Abiata event to the rare occurrence of a very intense tropical cyclone on the coast at Djibouti ($11^{\circ} 33'N$, $43^{\circ} 09'E$) on 27 October 1972. There had been a similar event in the same area in 1896.

*Present Address: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 20560, U.S.A.

*The opinions and assertions by these authors do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Navy Department or the naval service at large. The observations were made whilst engaged in research supported by the Office of Naval Research Task Order No. N00014-57-A-0399-0009 and N00014-76-C-0546, and Naval Medical Research & Development Command Work Unit MRO41.09.0014D6HJ.

Although the first of the gulls were not seen until many weeks after this incident, they could have been missed when the phalaropes were seen on 2, 3, and 4 December, on a lake the size of Abiata, a large portion of whose shoreline is rarely if ever covered by observers. The visits on 3 and 4 December did not in any case extend to the area where the gulls were seen on 28 December. However, observations in subsequent years have shown that the gulls at least are regular visitors, in the absence of any associated cyclones, and that they are obviously widely distributed on inland lakes in Ethiopia. Further records, of this gull, are listed below:

Locality*	Number	Date	Authority
Lake Tana	1 imm.	24.1.73	Olson (1976)
Lake Abiata	110	6.1.74	Ash
Lake Abiata	111	3.3.74	Ash
Lake Langano	1 imm.	21.12.74	Ash
Lake Langano	1 imm.	19.1.75	Vittery (1975)
Lake Langano	1 ad.	21.1.75	Vittery (1975)
Lake Chamo	1 ad.	24.1.75	Ash
Lake Abiata	71	22.2.75	Ash
Lake Langano	19	15-17.3.75	Vittery (1975)
Lake Turkana	3	18.3.75	Ash
Lake Langano	1 imm.	12.4.75	Vittery (1975)
Lake Abiata	32	17.1.76	Ash

The remains of the dead bird found at Bahar Dar by Dr. Olson were sent to J.S.A. as a probable Herring-gull *Larus argentatus*, which it closely resembled. The specimen was identified as the Great Black-headed Gull, and subsequently confirmed as such at the Smithsonian Institution. The adult found at Lake Chamo was unusual in sitting alone on the water far from land; it was very wild and unapproachable by boat. The three birds on Lake Turkana were on a mud bank to the southwest of the Omo Delta at a position judged to be right on the Kenya/Ethiopia border in the opinion of a local missionary, whose boat the observer was in, and who had long experience of the area.

Like the Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*, *L. ichythaetus* adults begin to acquire breeding plumage early in the year, and the larger proportion in Ethiopia, appear to be adults. On 12 January, more than 62 of 83 birds were adult, but only two were in breeding plumage; by 3 February, more than 72 of 96 birds were adult and about 20 were in breeding plumage. On 22 February, 'many' of 71 birds were adults in breeding plumage, and the same remark was applied to 111 birds on 3 March. On 10 March, 25 birds were "mostly adult".

Regarding the gulls, the question remains unanswered as to whether their inland overwintering in Ethiopia is a long established custom, or a new habit developed in the last few years which has now become firmly established. Even large numbers of large gulls can be overlooked amongst the legions of birds in the Abiata/Langano region. This is the most intensely bird-watched area in Ethiopia, yet with the exception of Alan Vittery's observations, no other observer has ever recorded this species.

*Approximate coordinates for sites of observations are: Lake Tana (Bahar Dar) 11° 37'N, 37° 25'E; Lake Abiata 7° 41'N, 38° 33'E; Lake Langano 7° 41'N, 38° 43'E; Lake Chamo 05° 53'N, 37° 38'E; Lake Turkana 4° 31'N, 36° 02'E.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Dr. C. Olson for the opportunity of examining the Lake Tana gull and Dr. G. E. Watson for his comments on the specimen.

REFERENCES

ASH, J. S. (1972). Charadriiform birds in the Ethiopian Rift Valley. *Walia* 4: 14-18.
BACKHURST, G. C., BRITTON, P. L. & MANN, C. F. (1973). The less common Palearctic migrant birds of Kenya and Tanzania. *Jl. E. Africa nat. Hist. Soc. Nat. Mus.* 140: 1-38.
EARP, W. (1973). Visit to Flamingo Lake. *Eth. Wildlife & N.H.S. Newsletter* 72.
HAY, P. (1969). Checklist of the birds of Awash National Park and Basaaka area. Special Mimeo. *Report I.E.G. Wildlife Conservation Department*.
HOPSON, A. J. & Hopson, J. (1973). Lake Rudolf and environs. Mimeo 9 pp.
OLSON, C. (1976). Summary of field observations of birds from Begemder and Simien Province. *Walia* 7: 17-24.
TYLER, L. & TYLER, S. J. (1974). Recent sightings. *Eth. Wildlife & N.H.S. Newsletter* 84.
URBAN, E. K. & BROWN, L. H. (1971). *A checklist of the birds of Ethiopia*. Haile Selassie I University Press, Addis Ababa.
VITTERY, A. (1975). In *Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society Newsletters* 94, 96 and 97.

(Received 11 November 1976)



3 9088 01313 7328